

Black Feminism at Twenty-One: Reflections on the Evolution of a National Community

After mourning the loss of several stillborn black feminist organizations over the course of the 1990s, the midwives were beginning to feel cursed. Why did the baby keep dying before she could be nursed to life? Why did we seem unable to sustain a national organization beyond the moment of crisis or celebration that inspired its conception? There were political and personality differences at play, to be sure, and there was also the sheer enormity of the task and the lack of resources, time, and stamina, given all the other battles we were fighting simultaneously. But there had to be something else. After all, we knew there was a constituency for black feminist ideas and issues. There was the African-American Women in Defense of Ourselves (AAWIDOO) mobilization of sixteen hundred women in response to the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings in 1991. A few years later, in response to the Million Man March (MMM), there was another series of gatherings, a public statement critical of the march, and several follow-up gatherings under the banner of African-American Agenda 2000. And in Chicago in 1998, a historic gathering of the Black Radical Congress (BRC) inspired the formation of a Black Feminist Caucus. But by 1999, it appeared that all of these attempts at creating a national black feminist entity centered on the politics of grassroots organizing had failed.

After all of our meetings, conferences, mobilizations, listservs, draft documents, retreats, and rallies, what did we have to show for our efforts? There was no name, no structure, no office, no budget, not even a voice-mail or post-office box. There was no organization for black feminists/womanists on par with the National Organization for Women or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—no national marker that we actually existed. But we do exist—a loose network of black

This article, constrained by time and space, does not profess to be a comprehensive survey of black feminist political work or scholarship; rather, it highlights those struggles and campaigns in which I have been directly involved and the scholarly literature that intersects with my own research and writing.

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women activists and a few male fellow travelers and nonblack supporters who have established a tangible political history together and, more important, have established the parameters of a shared political consensus. It is that consensus, as well as the awkward but protracted process by which it was achieved, that offers hope for a more democratic and inclusive progressive movement in the twenty-first century.

When Deborah King, Elsa Barkley Brown, and I launched the AAWIDOO campaign to protest Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court and to highlight the issue of sexual harassment and the media's silencing of black women, we did not talk about our long-term goals. As it turned out, our ideas about where the mobilization was headed and at what pace were quite different, and, after several local branches in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia failed to sustain themselves without the support of a national body or solidly planted roots, the entire AAWIDOO initiative slowly and quietly faded out of existence. Nevertheless, a collective silence had been broken. Not since the National Black Feminist Organization and its more well-known offshoot, the Combahee River Collective, made their marks in the mid-1970s had black women in the United States organized around a feminist/womanist agenda and made a national public intervention. We raised more than \$50,000 in a short time to place ads in the *New York Times* and African-American newspapers around the country, and we compiled a mailing list of over two thousand names, which itself became a vital resource for subsequent local and national mobilizations. The campaign represented a growing consensus among an often invisible network of activists and intellectuals who at least partly shared a political vision, even if we were not all card-carrying members of any one club.¹

In 1993, black feminist writer Jill Nelson, activist Gail Garfield, and others organized a series of rallies to protest plans by the predominantly male political establishment of Harlem to give Mike Tyson, a convicted rapist, a hero's welcome after his release from prison. Black feminist activists in Harlem took the principled but unpopular position that rape was both a feminist issue and a black community issue and that, racism within the criminal justice system notwithstanding, rapists could not be celebrated as heroes in our community. The Harlem activists requested the AAWI-

¹ During the MMM mobilization, the *New York Times Magazine* featured a story on black feminism by a novice writer who distorted and obscured more about black feminism than she revealed (Zooks 1995). This type of skewed media coverage reinforces invisibility as much as outright silence does. For more carefully researched studies of black feminism and black women's political activism, see Smith 1983; Giddings 1984; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Collins 1998.

DOO mailing list to publicize and garner support for their campaign, and AAWIDOO's strategy of buying newspaper ads served as an inspiration and model for St. Louis activists who organized a similar campaign against the exaltation of Tyson in their community.²

The growing network of black feminists across the country again became visible in 1995 when the aspiring patriarch of black politics, Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan, convened a gathering of men in the nation's capital to reclaim their rightful places as heads of their families and leaders of the entire black community. Feminist activist and law professor Kimberle Crenshaw organized a national meeting in New York in the spring of 1995 to explore how black feminists should respond to the MMM. We formed an ad hoc committee, issued a public statement, and participated in several community forums. Our response to the MMM and the increasing male-centeredness of black politics and community priorities represented a deepening national consensus among black feminists. The black community as a whole was sharply divided over the march, with the majority in support. The issue, for many, was not clear cut: for some, opposing Clarence Thomas's sexism had been easy because there were so many other reasons (having to do with his conservative antiblack politics) to oppose him, but to challenge a charismatic religious icon like Farrakhan or a superstar athlete like Tyson was a different matter altogether. Nevertheless, black feminists once again mobilized on fairly short notice to do precisely that.

The black feminist statement issued on the eve of the MMM, like AAWIDOO's four years earlier, was not a narrow, single-issue document. It outlined both the sexism and unprecedented gender exclusivity of the MMM and also the conservative class message of the march's principal spokesman. A core of activists held several follow-up meetings and a three-day-long retreat to try to map out a way forward after the march. Again, old phone chains from previous mobilizations were activated and relationships reestablished. There was a clear sense of a tangible national constituency. While most of those who participated were college educated and, to a large extent, middle class, we were engaged in many different areas of political work: international human rights; antiviolence; opposition to the prison industrial complex; welfare rights and antipoverty work; civil rights and sexual harassment litigation; alternative media; lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transsexual work; and student organizing. Some of the members of this group, which called itself African-American Agenda 2000, later became key organizers of either the African American Policy Forum or the

² White 1999 provides an excellent detailed analysis of the St. Louis campaign.

Feminist Caucus of the Black Radical Congress (two groups that reconnected to work on the Tabitha Walrond case in the summer of 1999).³ Even though questions of strategy and tactics have divided us at times, our politics keep bringing us back together.

So, what are the politics that unite a disparate cross section of organizers under the rubric of black feminism? Let me first address the method and style of organizing and then, briefly, the ideological content. Over the past decade, the style of black feminist work has represented a democratic impulse within the larger progressive movement, with decentralized mobilization efforts, informal leadership, and flexible structures. This has not always been the most efficient way to organize, but the political benefits have outweighed the inconvenience. Moreover, we have benefited from such organizational structures, which have consisted of less hierarchical steering committees and coordinating groups rather than chairpersons, presidents, and officers in the more common linear fashion. Over the years, black women have evolved organization styles consistent with the specific cultural, economic, and historical realities that have defined our lives. I cannot, within the confines of this article, outline all of the nuanced variations, but one predominant strain is a decentralized, group-centered, grassroots democratic model, best exemplified by the lifelong work of Ella Jo Baker and Septima Poinsette Clark.⁴ Given this history, it is not surprising that no single charismatic figure has emerged to personify and symbolize the movement. For example, there is no dark-skinned version of Gloria Steinem or Betty Freidan in black feminist circles; there are no female counterparts to Louis Farrakhan or Jesse Jackson, Sr. in terms of political visibility. Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, and bell hooks are perhaps the most renowned living black feminist personae, but, for different reasons, each has admirably resisted and declined icon status.

But what are the ideological tenets around which black feminists have organized? Perhaps strongest is the notion that race, class, gender, and sexuality are codependent variables that cannot readily be separated and ranked in scholarship, in political practice, or in lived experience. The main tension within diverse political coalitions has been the tendency to rank

³ Walrond was a young black woman on welfare who, in May 1999, was convicted of negligent homicide for her baby's death. She had attempted unsuccessfully to breast-feed the baby, was not given adequate medical support, and was denied medical treatment for the child a short time before he died because his Medicaid card had not yet arrived in the mail. A coalition of groups supported Walrond's case, citing it as an example of sexism, racism, economic injustice, and the growing emphasis on prisons over social services.

⁴ On the democratic character of many of black women's organizing efforts, see Brodkin 1988; Payne 1995; Robnett 1997.

different systems of oppression and thus prioritize the liberation agendas of certain groups within the coalition. Because any political agenda that addresses the realities of most African-American women's lives must deal with the four major systems of oppression and exploitation—race, class, gender, and sexuality—black feminist politics radically breaks down the notion of mutually exclusive, competing identities and interests and instead understands identities and political process as organic, fluid, interdependent, dynamic, and historical. The openness of our political processes and the permeability of our multiple identities help create the potential for collaborations that transcend social boundaries and reject elitist criteria for leadership. Instead of policing boundaries, racial or otherwise, black feminists have more often than not penetrated these barriers, expanding the meaning of "we" and "community" in the process.

Contrary to those who argue that black struggles, women's struggles, queer struggles narrow our range of vision and divide us into factions, the radical organizers and theorists within these so-called identity-based movements actually offer the terms for a higher level of unity, integration, and interaction. Radicals within the feminist, lesbigay-trans, and people of color communities generally see fighting against economic exploitation as intimately related to, and inseparable from, the fight against racism, sexism, and heterosexism and as a critical component of their political agenda. Thus, these forces are potentially the connective tissue between various social change movements and constituencies, rather than the wedge that divides them. Nothing embodies this spirit better than the founding statement of the Combahee River Collective, conceived nearly a quarter-century ago by black lesbian feminist activists in Boston, many of whom continue to play central roles in progressive struggles today. It reads: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives" (Combahee River Collective [1977] 1995, 232).

It is no coincidence, then, that black feminist organizers around the country have deeply immersed themselves in struggles that incorporate but are not isolated to gender issues.⁵ In the decades since the formation of the

⁵ For example, Beth Richie's (1995) work on domestic violence has connections with larger antiviolence, antipoverty, and prisoners' rights movements, as does Angela Davis's work on the prison industrial complex. Atlanta-based black feminist Loretta Ross and Washington D.C.-based organizer and law professor Lisa Crooms have worked on international and domestic human rights projects that incorporate many issues in addition to gender.

short-lived Combahee River Collective, black feminist practice has evolved, not so much reinventing itself as building on the foundational vision, outlined in 1977, of an inclusive, multi-issue political agenda built on a fluid democratic practice. And while we often bemoan the absence of a tangible physical place of our own, black feminists are not invisible, nor have we been effectively silenced. A wealth of scholarship has helped to forge a heterogeneous body of work that explores and debates the applications and interpretations of black feminist political ideology. More important, because of our persistent efforts—the lessons learned, strategies explored, trust established, storms weathered—perhaps now we have the kind of history that can give us greater optimism for the future, optimism that might enable the forging of an independent black feminist organization with links and ties to multiple other oppositional and visionary movements of the twenty-first century.

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Barbara Smith's long and diverse career of outspoken activism (as chronicled in Smith 1998) on issues from police brutality to the case of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal belies the stereotype that the political agenda of a black lesbian is narrow or parochial. And the late black lesbian feminist poet-activist Audre Lorde was the embodiment of such broad-based politics: all issues having to do with injustice were her issues (and, since her death, the New York-based Audre Lorde Project has carried on her tradition) (see also hooks 1984).

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